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ABSTRACT

In preparing election debate offerings for the public, the news departments of six local television stations in New York State--the ABC, NBC, and CBS affiliates in Syracuse, the CBS and ABC affiliates in Buffalo, and the ABC affiliate in Rochester--were often more concerned with format decisions, hinging on "what will fit" within a prescribed length of time, rather than in determining the content and budgeting for the appropriate length of time needed to present that content. Most stations preferred live debate, the selection of the panel of questions varied, and all stations except one presented 60-minute programs with live audiences. Some stations included third party sponsorships, such as the League of Women Voters, and usually limited local election debates to those races which generated significant local interest, such as hotly contested races, or serious challenges to an incumbent. Minor party candidates were rarely included in the debates, unless they appeared to have a chance of winning. The debate schedules of 1987 for these stations were similar to the schedules of 1986, paying heed to the need to get out information to the public while at the same time recognizing the "glitz factor" in producing an interesting product. (Seven footnotes are appended.) (MM)

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"LOCAL TELEVISED DEBATES: STYLE VERSUS CONTENT"

This paper will explore the format and content decisions made by six local television news departments as they prepared their presentations of election debates to their viewing publics. As will be shown, in many instances the format decisions hinge more on "what will fit" within a prescribed length of time than determining the content one wants to get out to the public and budgeting for the appropriate length of time to present that content. Production areas that will be addressed here include whether a debate was live or videotaped in advance, what were the factors in determining the composition of panels of questioners, whether a station sought third party sponsorship for a debate, what races would be featured for a debate, which candidates running in those races would be invited to participate and finally a comparison of the 1986 and 1987 debate schedules of these six local stations.

Six television news directors or special events producers in three markets in Western and Central New York were interviewed for this project: the ABC, NBC and CBS affiliates in Syracuse, the CBS and ABC affiliate in Buffalo and the ABC affiliate in Rochester. References are also included on the Rochester PBS debate which was produced by this author. All of these stations had a history of staging local election debates and planned to continue the practice in the future. While the National Association of Broadcasters

reports the number of television stations offering free time to political candidates is increasing and that the amount of airtime is likewise increasing,[1] these stations interviewed had limited their debate allowance to one or two per election season for the past several years.

Given the fact that televising election debates is a losing proposition financially, it is not surprising that the stations limited the number of their debates. What is surprising is where the stations placed the Fall 1986 debates in their schedule. Two put the debates in evening prime time, displacing network programming while four chose to put their debates in prime time access (7-8 pm), one of the most profitable time slots for local affiliates. The gamble was whether the debate would gather enough of an audience and/or local good will to make it worthwhile for a station to forego other, more profitable programming. The news departments were in competition with the programming departments for the placement of the debates -- sometimes the programming department predominated and the debate was moved to a less favorable place in the schedule or cut in length, and sometimes the news department came out ahead and the debate would air in prime time or prime time access.

LIVE VERSUS TAPED

The majority of the news directors interviewed preferred the spontaneity of a live debate -- although one station was backed into an 11:30 pm tape delay situation because of an unprecedented number of innings in a World Series game. All of those interviewed agreed that the spontaneity of a live debate made for "better" television and put the candidates on edge. One Syracuse station has since introduced a taped factor in their debate format:

videotaping questions from the public beforehand and inserting them in the course of the debate. Part of this effort was to introduce another voice - that of the voting public - in the forum but the production factor of getting away from talking heads in the studio figures large as well. As this Syracuse news director saw it, having questions from the viewing public - even on videotape - brought the debate closer to the level of the voter.

> Reporters sometimes, I think are a little too close to the subject and it's too easy for them possibly, to get off on tangents or to become more concerned with the finer points of some issues that may not be of such great concern to viewers.[2]

THE PANEL OF QUESTIONERS

Local election debates are a means by which local stations can reach out to their viewing public and inexpensively provide a public service. Some stations see the local election debate as a means of highlighting their reporting staffs. Four of the stations interviewed included news personnel from other media - usually a radio station or newspaper. The other two preferred their debates to be presentations of their own news departments - arguing that they could provide a balanced presentation without giving attention to a competitor's journalists. In the case of the Rochester ABC affiliate, the news anchor opened and closed the debate from the news set. Following the introduction, the anchor turned control over to the senior reporter from the station who was the moderator for the half hour debate. This particular news director felt that no other questioner was necessary. But the format allowed the candidates to question only each other. There were no questions from the moderator or any reporter. Indeed, with only

thirty minutes to work with (minus time for a commercial break), there was only time for one question to each candidate, one rebuttal and opening and closing statements. In sharp contrast to this arrangement was the 1986 Kemp/Keane Congressional debate in Buffalo. Prolonged negotiations with the candidates over a format finally resulted in all three commercial TV stations having participants on the panel and all three stations airing the debate.

The stations interviewed were split on allowing candidates to question each other in the course of a televised debate, though the debate producers interviewed agreed that having the candidates face each other directly provided for an interesting forum. The CBS affiliate in Syracuse had its moderator introduce a topic and then open the floor to comments from the candidates. Following each statement, the candidates had the opportunity to question each other's stand. Some stations did not require an element of candidates questioning each other while the ABC affiliate in Syracuse insisted on it. According to that station's news director:

> I think that to see the two of them go head to head is very important and to get a sense of how do these people regard one another, is it a vicious campaign, is it a personal thing, are they keeping it on a very professional level and asking specific issues... it's usually the best part of the debate.[3]

The Rochester PBS affiliate mixed telephoned-in live questions from the viewing public with questions between the candidates during its one hour debate in one Congressional race. In both the example of the Syracuse ABC affiliate debate and the Rochester PBS affiliate debate, both stations had relinquished content control in favor of letting the candidates determine the

points of contention most interesting to the public, or in the case of the PBS debate, the jab at the opponent most likely to call attention to the opponent's weakness. Of the 19 questions asked during the PBS debate, (including questions between candidates), the incumbent devoted five rounds to the challenger's absence in the state legislature on the day a particular utility bill came to a vote. The incumbent Congressman devoted all of his question opportunities to quiz his opponent (a state legislator) why she had the record note her as present and voting in favor of the bill when in fact she was absent. After the third round of this, it became obvious the incumbent sought to rattle the challenger, he was not really seeking an answer to his question. Phoned-in questions from the viewing public were pre-screened to avoid duplication but were taken live on the air (no tape delay). Despite the screening, members of each candidate's campaign staffs were able to get through and ask "planted" questions which would put the opponent in an unfavorable light. Rather than following a pre-determined line of questioning then, the candidates questioning each other and the taking of live phone calls presented more of a free-for-all. Questions that reporters covering the candidates on a daily basis would have asked may or may not surface. The result here weighed more toward the side of theatrical style than content about issues.

Those stations which did not have the candidates question each other fell into two categories: either the station could not get the candidates to agree to that portion of the format and so had to abandon it in order to get the debate on the air or the station truly felt that reporters could best determine the appropriate questions for a public forum.

LENGTH OF BROADCAST

With the exception of the Rochester ABC affiliate, the other stations interviewed produced sixty minute programs. All felt that less than that amount of time did not allow for adequate questioning and response. Interestingly, for the 1987 debate season, the Buffalo ABC affiliate planned two debates for the County Executive race - the first an hour debate featuring reporters questioning the candidates, and the second, a half hour forum aired two days before Election Day, featured the candidates questioning each other without the inclusion of reporters.

Stations uniformly chose to stage the debates from their own studios - partly, to be sure, for convenience and identity with the station - with the exception of the CBS affiliate in Buffalo which chose to stage some of its debates on location. This gave the station visibility in that part of the market area (in this case, a state legislature race south of Buffalo) as well as incorporating a visual element of being on location. A live audience was also part of that debate format, with the tickets distributed by each candidate's camp as well as by the League of Women Voters.

THIRD PARTY SPONSORSHIP

Interestingly, the two Buffalo stations were the ONLY stations of those interviewed which embraced third party sponsorship in the planning and execution of their debates. The Buffalo CBS affiliate worked with the League of Women Voters in 1986 and in prior years to set up debates for various races. As the election producer put it, "The League lends credibility to the debates and we try to work with them as much as possible."[4] Yet this year,

that same CBS affiliate decided to produce its debate without League sponsorship. Their reason: they did not feel they needed the League's endorsement. This year, the ABC Buffalo affiliate worked with the League whereas before it had not sought third party sponsorship. This particular ABC producer liked the credibility the League endorsement exuded, though he staunchly defended their debate production as the station's not the League's. Thus deciding whether to use third party sponsorship seems to rest on whether that endorsement will aid the appearance of the debate and is not so much a concern for the overall quality or production of the debate. All of the other stations interviewed no longer included the League of Women Voters or any other third party sponsor in their debate productions. The law allows them to produce debates on their own, and that is how they prefer to do it.

SELECTION OF RACES/MINOR PARTY CANDIDATES

Although in any given election year there are a number of local races, the stations producing local election debates chose only those races they deemed had significant local interest; those that were hotly contested, those that were not seemingly a shoo-in for the incumbent, or those races that were generating a lot of press coverage. Using these criteria meant that stations limited themselves to no more than two election debates in any election season.

In the 1986 election season, all of the stations interviewed declined to include minor party candidates. As the revision to the FCC regulations allows, stations may sponsor their own debates and cover them as bona fide news events. They may select the races and the candidates, and they may exclude candidates -- notably minor party contenders. The feeling was

unanimous among the stations interviewed: minor party candidates, even those bona fide candidates whose names appeared on the ballot and who actively campaigned, did not "fit" into a televised debate format. The audience, say the news producers, is interested in those candidates who have a legitimate chance of winning. Minor party candidates, for the most part, are not seen as legitimate. In 1986, the stations did not include minor party candidates in any of their televised debates. Those candidates were covered in other ways - most frequently in the six and eleven o'clock newscasts and several had separate interview opportunities at other broadcast times.[5] The 1987 debate season did not stray from that. The Syracuse stations produced debates only on the County Executive race and neither the Conservative nor the Liberal candidates participated. The Buffalo stations also focused only on the County Executive race, but this year there was not a minor party candidate involved. But if there had been, say those producers, he/she would not have been included in a debate. Interestingly, the Rochester ABC affiliate was closed out of doing any debates - or rather the debate it wanted to do. Again, the race generating the most interest was for County Executive. The incumbent agreed to only one one-hour debate to be produced by the public broadcasting station. The incumbent cited time constrictions that precluded him from scheduling any others. However, the ABC producer said that were the incumbent to relent finally and appear on other debates, neither of the two declared minor party candidates would be included. The scheduled PBS debate did not include minor party candidates: a move which prompted the excluded Conservative candidate to ask his fellow Conservative lawmakers to reconsider government funding for the local PBS station. There appears to be an element of arrogance here on the part of the debate producer. If there are legitimate candidates of minor parties and they will

appear on the November ballot, should not the public hear them in the context of all other legitimate candidates on the ballot? Debate producers interviewed argued that ideally, yes, everyone should be included. But televised debates are not ideal structures. Time allowances for each candidate to respond to questions, rebuttals, opening and closing statements would take too long to be comprehensible if more than two candidates were involved. All of those stations interviewed agreed that if a third party candidate truly appeared to have a chance of winning or was mounting a "serious" campaign, then he/she would likely be included. But the news director at the ABC station in Syracuse added:

> I'm not so sure [exclusion from a debate] is the only factor against them [minor party candidates]. I think by the time we roll around to doing our debates, the campaign is so far along, frankly that what we usually hear is that people are sick of it with people declaring their candidacies literally a year ahead of time even for local office so... by the time our debates are on, I maintain that people have pretty much decided who they're voting for anyway.[6]

It should be noted that this same news director stated that among the factors he considers when selecting a race for a debate is whether or not it will make "good TV."

THE 1987 LINE-UP

This fall, I re-contacted all of the news director and personnel first interviewed last spring to ask what debates were scheduled for this year. In certain areas, changes occurred -- some of which I have already mentioned.

The Rochester ABC affiliate, as noted earlier, was shut out from doing the debate of its choice and did not schedule a debate. However, they had tentatively planned to have the same format as last year - namely a moderator from the station with the two principle candidates questioning each other, and the time allotted was to have been increased from half an hour to an hour. Tentative airtime was the prime time access slot, 7-8 pm on a weekday in October.

The ABC affiliate in Buffalo staged two debates on the same race, the first of which featured reporters from the station asking questions of the candidates, the candidates questioning each other and periodically the insertion of a pre-taped video question from a "man-in-the-street". The second debate was only half an hour in length and featured just the candidates with a moderator as time-keeper. The producer of these debates felt the race was sufficiently important to warrant two debates spaced roughly two weeks apart. The station chose to use its local news as a lead-in for both forums: in the first case, pre-empting ABC's NIGHTLINE 11:30 pm - 12:30 am and in the second case, following the Sunday local news at 6:30 pm. This station also sought and received League of Women Voter endorsement.

The Buffalo CBS affiliate staged one one-hour debate for candidates in the County Executive race. This is the station that had previously defended coordinating their debates with the League. This year, the producer did not feel such sponsorship was necessary. The debate aired in prime access time 7-8 pm one week before the election.

The ABC affiliate in Syracuse decided to do away with the format of having reporters ask questions and instead staged a one hour prime time forum where the candidates spoke on a variety of pre-determined topics. The candidates had furnished lists of topics to the station in advance of the debate from which the producer decided which issues would be discussed. The moderator would introduce a topic and then each candidate would have two minutes to speak followed by a one-minute rebuttal. While the candidates did not question each other specifically, this producer said that unofficial questioning did occur in the answer/rebuttal format. While in the planning of this debate pre-taped questions from the public were considered, that format was finally abandoned.

Up until three weeks before Election Day, the CBS affiliate in Syracuse had planned only one debate - that one featuring the candidates for County Executive. But upon calling this producer less than a week before Election Day, another debate had been planned between the candidates for District Attorney because, as the producer put it, the race suddenly got more interesting...what had previously been thought a landslide for the incumbent was no longer thought to be the case. The first debate between candidates for County Executive featured the candidates questioning each other as well as answering questions from three reporters (one from the TV station, one from a local radio station and a newspaper reporter). The second debate was recorded "live on tape" and aired during prime time that evening (9:40 pm following President Reagan's news conference). Neither debate featured questions from voters (live or pre-taped).

And the NBC affiliate in Syracuse, which last year hosted one debate with reporters asking questions of the two major party candidates in the local Congressional race, this year decided not to produce any debates. The news director said the decision was made by the programming department and not himself, but this particular station's experience in producing debates last year had left a bad taste in the mouth of the news director. In reflecting on the 1986 debate, he felt the station had given too much to the candidates.

> We tried to satisfy most of their concerns and I think the whole process got a little carried away. I think next time we're going to be more inclined to say this is the format if you want to participate, fine. If you don't, fine. The thing we have to remember is that we control the game and we can make the rules.

CONCLUSION

In considering their election debate offerings to the public, commercial stations have a number of factors to bear in mind. The debate should be informative to the public, offer the public an opportunity to see the candidate in a live, unrehearsed situation responding to questions and provide the public an opportunity to see the candidate's style and hear his/her platform. In producing debates, those stations interviewed put serving the public interest at the top of their list of reasons for doing debates. At the same time, stations are also juggling the factors of producing an interesting television program which will gather an audience, choosing the best participants for that forum (in all instances, the major party candidates only) and minimizing the boredom factor of merely a talking head program while maximizing production quality by interspersing live or pre-taped questions from the public. From market to market, stations are

still experimenting with formats to satisfy these objectives. By moving towards having the candidates directly question each other, stations are providing an audience the opportunity to see a bona fide debate. By incorporating questions from either the viewing public or the pre-taped "man in the street", the station is offering the semblance anyway of the public directly questioning the candidates.

To expect coverage of any but the most hotly contested races affecting the greatest number of viewers is fighting logic. Stations will never be able to ignore their fundamental business basics. But the continued interest (with one exception) in presenting candidate debates to the voting public is worth noting. It is not a perfect forum: the stations decide which races are "worthwhile" and it is highly unlikely that minor party candidates will ever be included: the formats pay heed to the need to get out information to the public while at the same time recognizing the glitz factor in producing an interesting product.

But Better an imperfect forum than going the route of the Syracuse NBC affiliate which has, at least for now, taken its ball and gone home.

FOOTNOTES

[1] National Association of Broadcasters Info-Pak/January 1987, page 2.

[2] Interview with Joseph Kirik, News Director at WTSM-TV, Syracuse (NBC affiliate) May 9, 1987

[3] Interview with Jeff Scheidecker, News Director at WIXT-TV, Syracuse (ABC affiliate) March 13, 1987

[4] Interview with Karen Sacks, Special Events Producer, WIVB-TV, Buffalo (CBS affiliate) March 5, 1987

[5] News Director Jeff Scheidecker offered broadcast time on weekend public affairs program to minor party candidates.

[6] Op. Cit. Scheidecker.

[7] Op. Cit. Kirik.